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Trade Unions and Democracy in South Africa: Union Organizational Challenges and Solidarities in a Time of Transformation

Sakhela Buhlungu, Mick Brookes and Geoffrey Wood*

Abstract

Based on the findings of a nation wide survey of Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) members, this article explores the state of internal democracy within the federation's affiliates, and degree of rank and file support for its alliance with the ruling ANC. It is concluded that, pessimistic accounts of the decay of internal union democracy and the alleged unpopularity of the ANC in particular and the tripartite Alliance in general seem misplaced. However, a panglossian view of continued and consistent union success is similarly unjustified; unions face the challenges of declining employment in the formal sector, and managing complex accommodations with business and government. Yet, the manner in which unions have coped with these challenges reflects a persistent organizational vibrancy which is encouraging for the future.

* Sakhela Buhlungu is Professor, Sociology of Work Programme (SWOP), University of Witwatersrand. Mick Brookes is Senior Lecturer, Middlesex University. Geoffrey Wood is Professor of HRM, University of Sheffield and Overseas Associate of SWOP, University of Witwatersrand.

The South African labour movement has been a source of inspiration to unions worldwide. South Africa's largest and most active union federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) has retained high levels of penetration in the private sector, and made concerted inroads into the public sector. In part due to COSATU's political clout and its alliance with the ruling African National Congress (ANC), South African labour legislation is among the most progressive in the world (see Buhlungu 2006: 13); the wholesale labour market deregulation that has taken place in many developed and industrializing societies remains firmly off the policy agenda in South Africa. As Buhlungu (2006: 13) notes, 'trade unions continue to play (the) role as custodians of the interests of the working class in South Africa'. Yet, there is a growing body of critical literature that points to serious organizational shortcomings in the federation. These critiques centre on three key issues: long term membership trends, the sustainability of shopfloor democracy, and the advisability of the ANC-alliance. Based on a nationwide survey of COSATU members, this article explores rank and file perceptions of the role of unions, the actual practice of participatory democracy on the shopfloor, and views of the tripartite alliance.

Understanding Union Growth and Decline

The literature on union growth and decline can be divided into two broad categories. Firstly, there are what might be referred to as *macro* approaches, which explore the consequences of broader changes in the economy and/or regulatory environment for unions. Secondly, *micro* level approaches explore the strategies unions have adopted to deal with adverse circumstances, and the potential for unions to impact on wider social structures.

The *macro* level literature can be divided into a number of sub-genres. Firstly, there is the comparative labour movements literature. Initially, a response to the rise of multi-national corporations in the 1950s and 1960s, this literature sought to explore the manner in which labour movements operate in different national contexts, and their responses to common challenges, drawing out similarities and contrasts (c.f. Sturmthal 1972; McBrearty 1973); more recently, this has been focused onto the consequences in terms of union decline and the possibilities for renewal

given external constraints (Turner 2004: 1-9; Cornfield and McCammon 2003).

The influential Varieties of Capitalism (VOC) literature argues that embedded institutional frameworks are likely to constrain or enable unions (Hall and Soskice 2001: 29; Turner 2004: 3). A core distinction made in this literature is between liberal market economies (LMEs) and collaborative market ones (CMEs) (Hall and Soskice 2001: 22-30; Lincoln and Kalleberg 1990). In the former, shareholders enjoy strong rights, with financial markets impelling firms to pay close attention to current earnings and share prices; in the latter, more patient sources of capital encourages firms to take a longer view (Hall and Soskice 2001: 22-30). Inter firm relations in LMEs is likely to be characterized by adverse competition, in CMEs by alliances (Hall and Soskice 2001: 30). Training in LMEs tends to be orientated towards general generic skills, whilst in CMEs, there is a stronger emphasis on industry specific skills (Hall and Soskice 2001: 30). Finally, in LMEs, labour markets are more flexible, with employers having a greater ability to hire and fire workers, whilst collective bargaining is characterized by voluntarism (ibid.:30).

Hence, from a VOC perspective, unions are likely to do relatively poorly in LMEs, and, given the embedded and path dependent nature of institutional realities, there is little that unions can do about this (Turner 2004: 3). This view has been contested by both *micro* action orientated approaches that focus on actors and solidarities and the strategic choices unions make (Turner 2004: 3-5), and indeed, contemporary Regulationist critiques that reject the notion that innovations and emerging practices that are incompatible with existing institutional realities will necessary fail (Boyer 2006: 42). Boyer (2006: 42) argues that actions may deliver changes that will result in a system that may have appeared impossible by contemporary actors. Indeed, seemingly uniform, homogenizing external forces may have complex and contingent effects on the fortunes of unions (Frenkel and Kuravilla 2002: 389). In most respects, South Africa is a LME; hence, the ability of unions to prosper in such a context deserves closer examination.

Alternative macro-institutional approaches focus on the effects of law. La Porta et al (1998: 1113-4) argue that,

in common law countries, shareholder and owner rights are stronger, resulting in firms placing a stronger emphasis on returns, rather than the rights of other stakeholders. Godard (2004) explores the effects of labour legislation on unions in northern America. Again, Ludlum et al. (2003) explore the relationship between political context, law and industrial relations outcomes. Much of the literature falling into this sub-category tends to be overwhelmingly pessimistic in nature; it is seen as extremely difficult for unions to contest legislative realities, or indeed, operate effectively under adverse legislation.

Finally, there are studies that explore the effects of wider changes in economic circumstances. For example, Kelly (1998: 27-30) looks at the effects of long-term fluctuations in the global economy for unions, and the material circumstances under which mobilisation is likely to take place. Drawing on classical theories of deprivation, Kelly notes that upsurges in unionisation and employer counter-attacks tend to take place at times of economic turnaround, as each party tries to secure its position in adversity, or maximise its share of the benefits accruing from an upturn. Whilst similarly concerned with the effects of changes in objective circumstances, Visser (2001: 8&**) adopts a rather more short-term perspective in looking at the consequences of fluctuations in economic and regulatory circumstances. Whilst there is little doubt that objective external circumstances, be they changes in the institutional configurations governing working life, and/or the wider economy do affect unions, these accounts tend to underplay the extent to which the latter are remoulded in response to the actions and decisions of interests at the point of production: more recent work has again focused on the role of actors on broader political economic realities, rather than vice-versa (Kelly and Frege 2004: 182-183).

Micro level approaches explore the consequences of specific union organising strategies for the overall labour movement, the ability of such strategies to overcome the adverse effects of external environment, and, in some cases, the possibilities for revitalised unions bringing about broader institutional change. A large proportion of this literature is case study based, seeking to highlight the experiences of individual unions with specific organising models (see Gall 2003: 1-18; Nissen 1999), with a view to disseminating best practice (Hurd **). Based on

research conducted within a number of US unions, Clark (2000: 8&**) argues that employee commitment to a union and willingness to participate in union affairs is in part, moulded by initial contacts with union officials and activists; focused one to one contact, and focusing on issues (rather than packages of abstract policies) may transform what would otherwise be passive members into active participants in union affairs. However, a number of more ambitious cross country comparisons exist with a strong focus on developing world issues, most notably that of Moody (1997: 269-292), which not only seek to highlight viable strategic options, but also the extent to which reinvigorated labour movements may contribute to the remaking of national policies (c.f. Nissen 2002).

Much of this literature served to promote the organising model and/or, in the case of the developing world, social movement unionism (SMU) (Gall 2003: 1-19; Markowitz 1999). The SMU literature focuses more on issues of engagement and disengagement; to what extent do unions need to form alliances or make deals with other actors in advancing their agenda (c.f. Waterman 1999). To the more radical literature, a defining feature of SMU is its independence from both state and capital (c.f. Desai 2002); hence, new strategies have to transcend a traditional union emphasis on engagement (c.f. Nissen 2002).

The increasingly apparent limitations of the organising model raises the question as to whether it is really transferable between national or regional institutional contexts (Hurd 2004 ** 8&). Given that a central feature of union activity has been the pursuit of bargaining rights, the extent to which unions may be able, simply through the selection of a specific set of strategies, to transcend the confines imposed by everyday transactions with employers or the objective operations of markets, remains unclear (Greer 2003: 131-140).

Finally, there have been a limited number of recent attempts to link these approaches. For example, in a recent edited collection, Verma and Kochan (2004 ** 8&) combine a number of *macro* and *micro* accounts, comparing and contrasting the different viewpoints. Gunderson and Verma (2003) argue that, given the absence of international labour legislation, industrial relations practices will be shaped by the play of market and social forces operating at global and local levels, and the specific approaches

towards negotiation adopted by the IR core actors. Similarly, Kelly and Frege (2004: 182-183) and Harcourt and Wood (2004 ** &8&) bring together analyses of the track record of the organising model with studies on the effects of objective regulatory and external economic forces: an actor centred approach to political economy that is influenced by recent developments and critiques of institutionalist theories (Crouch 2005: 359-363; Boyer 2006: 36). Whilst primarily concerned with grassroots perceptions, this article focuses on both conceptualizations of the implications broader macro-economic and regulatory changes for the relevance of unions, the sustainability of grassroots participatory democracy, and the advisability of specific strategic choices at both plant and national level. Hence, it seeks to bridge both macro- and micro- concerns, exploring the sustainability of a specific model of shopfloor democracy and internally democratic social movement unionism, and the viability of specific forms of engagement.

Background: The Rise of COSATU

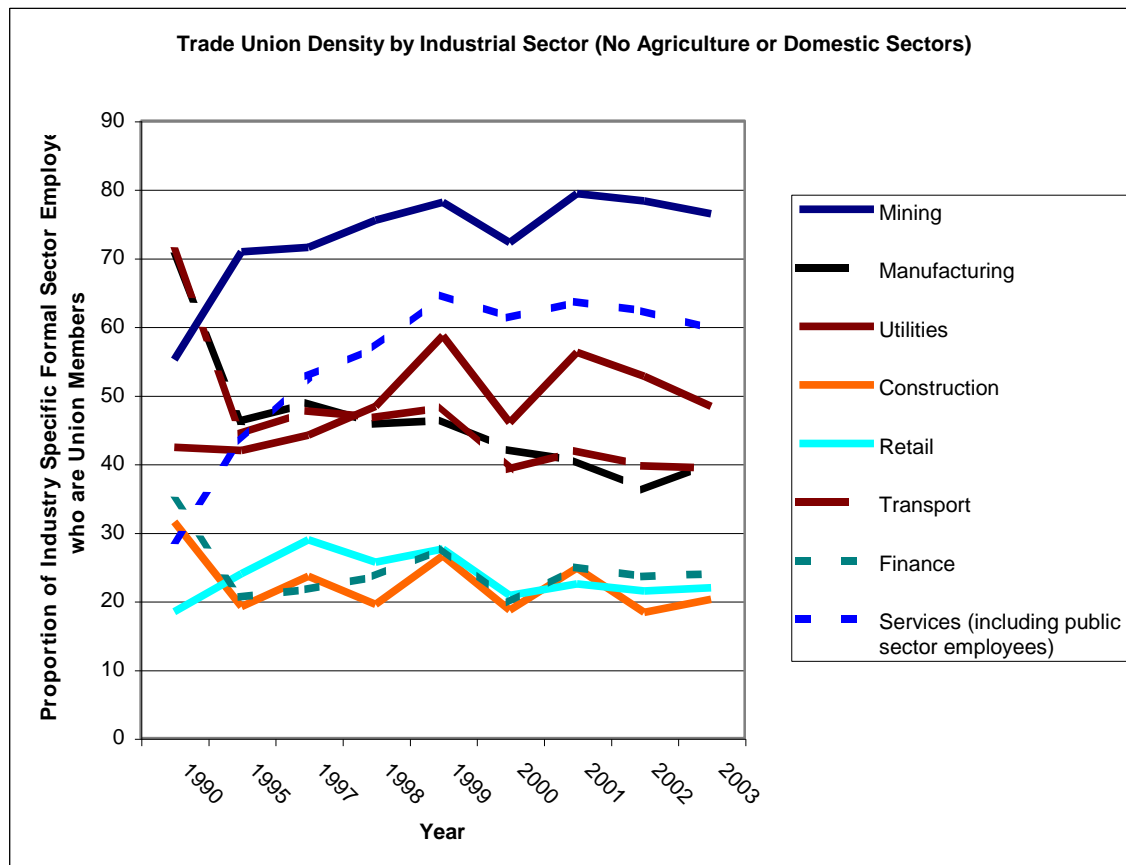
The history of South African trade unions prior to 1973 is one of exclusive unionism, punctuated by periodic attempts to promote more broadly based alternatives and to build a common unity. South Africa's first unions were organized by immigrant white craft workers; pressures towards deskilling in the early twentieth century resulted in an historic compromise between white workers, state and business, whereby the former traded off militancy in return for job protection on race lines (Karis & Carter 1977:55). Yet, this only constitutes one strand of South African labour history. There were numerous attempts made to specifically organize black workers, few of which succeeded in reaching out beyond a small handful of workplaces; up until the early 1970s, all remained dependent on a small handful of leaders and activists (Lewis 1984: 1; Bonner 1978: 118; c.f. Lambert 1988: 32). This left African workers largely unorganized, with white, coloured (mixed racial origin) and Indian workers being divided between unions that were bureaucratic and quiescent, and those that were fiercely racist.

In the early 1970s, a number of new independent worker service organizations sprung up, run by a combination of students and former trade union officials; these soon

developed into trade unions focusing their attentions on the largely unorganized African majority (Maree 1987: 3). In many cases, a strong premium was placed on shopfloor organization and democracy, as a means of overcoming the problems that earlier unions faced with over-centralization (Maree 1987: 3; Friedman 1987 ** &8&). Most came under the umbrella of COSATU, which was founded in 1985 (Baskin 1991: 66-67; COSATU 1985: 43-44). The independent unions recorded an impressive growth through most of the 1970s and 1980s, despite occasional setbacks, such as the 1987 miners' strike (Baskin 1991: 224-240; c.f. Markham and Mothikeli 1987: 58-95). COSATU unions rapidly penetrated the public sector in the late 1980s and 1990s, and have retained impressive penetration rates in large areas of the service and manufacturing sectors, despite the shock of large scale job losses in the latter following the scaling back of protective tariffs in the early 1990s.

Figure 1 provides details on changes in union densityⁱ: it can be seen that, despite significant drops in some areas such as transport, union density rates in COSATU's heartlands - mining, manufacturing and services - remain highⁱⁱ.

Figure 1: Trade Union Density in South Africa



(Dibben, Hinks and Wood 2007: 11, computed based on October Household Surveys and September Labour Force Surveys).

As early as the 1920s, South African labour law made provision for centralized collective bargaining; however, Africans were excluded up until 1979 (Friedman **&8&). Faced by the challenge of the independent unions, and the increasing costliness of an arbitrary racial division of labour, the then apartheid government attempted to incorporate African unions through according African workers the same bargaining rights as their white counterparts (Baskin 1991: 27). However, whilst the independent unions took advantage of the reforms to institutionalize their role, the government failed to politically incorporate them (Webster 1987). The internal democratic base of the unions, and members' shared experience of collective injustice impelled the unions towards a broader role of promoting social transformation (ibid.; Hirschsohn 2001: 442). This, in turn, led to COSATU entering into a formal Alliance with the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party in

the early 1990s. As Hirschohn (2001: 444) argues, COSATU followed a strategy of strategic engagement at a number of levels, combined with a willingness to make use of large-scale collective action to back up demands. Yet, all forms of engagement, be it workplace and industrial level collective bargaining, national level negotiations with government and employers, and alliances with political parties, entail compromises, that, to critics, has led to COSATU sacrificing long term principals for short-term concessions (c.f. Barchiesi and Bramble 1998 & **).

Crisis and Decline?

By the early 2000s, serious concerns emerged as to COSATU's present role and future trajectory from a number of quarters. These concerns can be divided into three broad categories. Firstly, there is the advisability of the tripartite alliance (Habib and Taylor 1999). Secondly, there is the durability of shopfloor democracy given inevitable oligarchic tendencies, and the day-to-day compromises made by shopfloor leadership (c.f. Ratchleff 2001 **&). A third concern, the federation's inability to make headway in areas other than full time permanent employees in the formal sector (Buhlungu 2006: 9; Webster 2006 ** &), is beyond the scope of this article. However, it should be noted that formal employment constitutes a diminishing proportion of the South African labour market. Moreover, wholesale job shedding in the private sector following on the cutting back of protective tariffs has greatly reduced the pool of potential union members, and caused drops in overall union membership levels in many areas (Webster 2006 **&).

The Crisis of the Alliance?

South African labour legislation is highly progressive, making provision for centralized bargaining, and a system of dispute resolution that enjoys a high degree of legitimacy. The centerpiece of South African labour legislation is the 1995 Labour Relations Act, which extended existing labour legislation; it retained industry specific *Bargaining Councils*, a German-style works council system (known as workplace forums) (albeit that this have, in most instances, only had limited impact), and a system of dispute resolution. The system incorporates strong elements of voluntarism - inter alia, the maintenance of centralized bargaining in a specific industry is contingent

on the support of the principal unions and employer associations - and has little effect on employers in the small business and informal sectors (Appollis 1995: 48). Again, employers enjoy far greater rights in terms of making redundancies than is commonly the case in CMEs. However, despite pressures from conservative sections of business and the right-wing opposition Democratic Alliance, the ANC has resisted demands for radical labour market deregulation. Indeed, earlier a number of loopholes in the 1995 Labour Relations Act, which, inter alia, allowed employers to escape the Act's provisions by classing workers as independent contractors (see Donnelly and Dunn 2006) have now been closed. Again, the process of privatization has been cautious and incremental - in part due to the problems experienced in attempting to privatize the telecommunications utility, Telkom, but also due to sustained union opposition - in sharp contrast to the radical measures introduced in many other emerging markets (Southall 2007 & **; Buhlungu 2004 & **). Both the maintenance - and expansion - of progressive labour legislation and the restraints on privatization represent, at least in part, the efforts of the ANC's alliance partners (see Buhlungu 2004; Buhlungu 2006).

Nonetheless, critics of COSATU's current position charge that the Alliance has proved 'humiliating' for federation (Habib and Taylor 1999). Following on the ANC's victory in the 1994, it gradually dropped its neo-Keynsian Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) in favour of the more-overtly neo-liberal Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy (Burawoy 2004), albeit that the former made something of a reappearance in the run up to the last (2006) national election. COSATU, it has been suggested, has been complicit in the betrayal of what had the potential to be a genuinely working-class revolution (Desai 2002; c.f. Phahla 2002: 84). Although commonly badged the 'ultra-left', the Alliance's critics include sections of COSATU's more conservative affiliates who remain unhappy about the federation's close association with the ANC; nonetheless, the most implacable, articulate, and outspoken opponents of the Alliance have been those from the left. COSATU leadership have gained a formal voice in political structures in return for acquiescing in marketization; this will result in leadership becoming remote from the real needs of members, opening up the federation to renewed attacks by capital (Barchiesi and Bramble 1998). Organized labour, it is said, faces a

dilemma between being complicit in the ANC's rightwards shift, or actively leaving the Alliance (Webster 2001). Finally, despite impressive GDP growth figures (up to 5% in recent years), unemployment remains extremely high (some estimates place it at over 40%) (EIU 2007); the ANC's inability to make serious progress on the latter front remains an abiding challenge and (see Donnelly and Dunn 2006) and a residual source of tension with union leaders and community based grassroots organizations (Desai 2002).

What threatened to be a major showdown between the unions and the ANC, a major public sector strike over wages and working conditions in June 2007 ended in a messy compromise solution: this experience underscored both the challenges the unions faced in sustaining large scale collective action, but also demonstrated the unwillingness - and, perhaps, inability - of the ANC to firmly break with the unions.

The Crisis of Shopfloor Democracy?

A second critique leveled against COSATU is that strong oligarchic tendencies have emasculated the internal participatory democracy within its affiliates.

Management are under increasing pressure - inter alia, in terms of *Employment Equity* legislation - be seen to be advancing blacks into management; meanwhile the ending of apartheid has opened up new careers in government and the public sector. Both have created a serious 'brain drain', with the position of shop steward becoming a good stepping stone to management or government (c.f. Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu 2007: 246; Ndala 2002: 76). In sectors such as mining, the position of a full-time shop (shaft) steward is not only a stepping stone into management, but also a well paid position in its own right: this serves as a residual source of tension for those left behind (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu 2007: 251).

Again, the gradual dissemination of new functionally flexible forms of work organization (Rogerson 2001: 357) have made collective bargaining increasingly complex and remote from the real needs and concerns of workers (Bramble and Barchiesi 1988). Increasingly, unions have exhibited a preference for doing business with long-standing bargaining partners than confronting awkward questions emerging from the shopfloor (ibid.). This has led to bitter internal

struggles, and clusters of progressive workers breaking away from COSATU affiliates (c.f. Bramble and Barchiesi 1988). In the 2000 Volkswagen and 2001 Engen strikes, workers challenged the leadership of their union, forming new structures closer to the needs of the rank-and-file (Rachleff 2001: 165; Desai 2000).

Hence, unable to beat capitalism, unions and their leaders have chosen to join it (ibid.). This has led to the emergence of new radical breakaway unions, such as the Oil, Gas, and Chemical Workers Union, that provide an alternative to the established unions. To COSATU's critics many of its affiliates are beyond reform; shopfloor structures for democracy and recall have become so unresponsive that the only meaningful option is exit (Rachleff 2001: 166). More nuanced accounts have pointed to deep cleavages amongst members, inter alia on gender lines, and between urban dwellers and migrant workers (Von Hold 2002; 2003). Again, Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu (2007: 246-251) point to the extent to which these new opportunities for upward mobility have eroded internal solidarity in the labour movement. Hence, a central contradiction has emerged: at a time when unions have the greatest potential to impact on society, their internal organization capacity has been weakened (ibid.).

Are these Problems really New?

There is little doubt that COSATU faces real internal and external challenges; the Alliance remains open-ended, with a range of possible outcomes possible. Again, a new generation of union leaders has to be developed to replace those gradually exiting to management and government. The proliferation of breakaway unions reflects serious divisions at shopfloor level. However, many of these issues and concerns are not new, but rather represent quotidian pressures that South Africa's independent unions have had to face - and have successfully managed for many years now.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the independent unions already had to face up to the complexities of alliances with popular community organizations. Initially, many union leaders were reluctant to link their fortunes too closely to progressive community organizations on account of the resources and attention that it would divert from shopfloor organization and issues; underlying this point of view,

was, however, not, in most instances, political conservatism, but rather a commitment to promoting an independent working class politics, centring on the factories (Baskin 1991: 96; c.f. Forster 1982). Dubbed 'workerists', this somewhat diverse grouping brought together revolutionary socialists and syndacalists, and 'economists', who favoured a near exclusive focus on wage and related issues (Baskin 1991: 96). Other, 'populist' unions that had chosen to build close links with progressive community organizations faced heavy handed action by the apartheid state; those that had neglected shopfloor organization were seriously weakened as a result of this (c.f. Friedman 1987; Morris 1982).

COSATU's launch brought together these two strands of thought. In general, the strongest unions proved to be those who had placed the greatest emphasis on building shopfloor organization; however, the excesses of the apartheid government and rank-and-file pressure impelled them towards a more outspoken political stance, and, ultimately, the ANC-alliance (Hirschohn 2004). Nonetheless, the current debate about the alliance still centres on the relative importance of strengthening an independent working class politics, and whether it has diverted attention away from the day-to-day issues of concern to the rank and file; there remains an 'ultra-left' strand that is implacably opposed to any links or compromises with cross-class political organizations that lack an explicitly socialist policy agenda. To its critics, the ultra-left's denial of the possibility of all forms of compromise, and its desire for a 'pure form' of trade unionism denies the possibility of pursuing strategic gains through bargaining; it similarly discounts the existing political loyalties and concerns of the bulk of trade union members (Shopsteward 11/2002). In short, it makes for factionalism - building breakaway unions catering to what needs and concerns of workers *should be*, rather than what they are - and isolation (ibid.). *In other words, the real question is whether the ANC-alliance is supported by the rank-and-file, and whether they feel it is responsive to its needs.*

Again, on the shopfloor, a long standing tension has existed between those who desired to institutionalize collective bargaining, and make strategic accommodations with management, and those who viewed industrial relations as 'trench warfare', as ongoing and ultimately irresolvable

struggles over the allocation of value and the control of work organization. Over the years, there have been many bitter wildcat strikes, and breakaway unions formed, following seemingly irresolvable disputes over bargaining tactics; in most cases, they originated following concerns that clusters of shopstewards and/or regional union officials had become too close to management, and were unresponsive to shopfloor demands (Friedman 1987; Von Holdt 1990). However, whilst not discounting the importance of real tensions and contradictions between the need to protect employment and secure wage increases, and long term issues of power, control and equity, many of these disputes – ranging from the 1990 strike at Mercedes Benz to the 2000 Volkswagen strike – were partially a product of both personality clashes and long-standing tensions as a result of painful and sometimes premature union mergers. *Here, the debate really revolves around the question as to whether levels of worker participation in shopfloor democracy are high, and whether adequate structures exist for accountability and recall.*

Statement of Hypotheses

Given the above, two 'pessimistic' hypotheses are derived:

Hypothesis 1

Worker participation in shopfloor democracy is low, and with inadequate structures for accountability and recall.

And

Hypothesis 2

Most COSATU members have reservations regarding the tripartite alliance in general and the ANC in particular.

Method

The *Taking Democracy Seriously* surveys represent the only regularly conducted and nationwide surveys of members of what is by far South Africa's largest and most effective union federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions. Previous surveys were conducted in 1994 (see Ginsburg et al. 1995) and 1998 (see Wood and Psoulis 2001); the survey that forms the basis of this article was

conducted in 2004 (see Buhlungu 2006). A full discussion of the history of these surveys, and further details on the survey methodology may be found in Buhlungu (2006). The 1994 survey revealed high levels of internal democracy both within long-standing affiliates in the manufacturing and mining sector and more recent affiliates in the public sector, and a solidification of political support behind the ANC in the run-up to South Africa's first ever democratic elections (Ginsburg et al. 1995). The 1998 survey revealed the persistence of both internal democracy and existing political loyalties in the immediate post-transition period (Wood and Psoulis 2001).

As with the previous surveys, the 2004 survey focused on members of COSATU countrywide. In all, 655 workers were interviewed in 2004 (see Buhlungu 2004: 4). However, the 2004 encompassed very much large numbers of public sector workers (35% of the sample) reflecting the expansion of the unions into this area (ibid.). The support of COSATU nationally was obtained, and this information communicated to COSATU affiliates' regional offices.

Interviews were conducted at workplace level. Area sampling was used. Firstly, this was done at the level of five geographical regions (the country's five principal provinces, where most of the population and industry are located). Secondly, within these areas, individual unionized workplaces were randomly selected, within specific sectors (see Wood and Psoulis 2001; Buhlungu 2006). In 1994, a list of organizations was compiled from directory information supplied by Telkom, the South African parastatal telecommunications utility, on sectoral lines; this listing of firms was updated in 1998 and 2004, to take account of entries and exits (Telkom make available electronically {in 1994 this was on floppy disks} listings of firms compiled for directory purposes). This listing would exclude very small businesses in the informal sector that lacked telephones; at the same time, such businesses would be most unlikely to have a union presence at all. Companies were then randomly selected within each sector, and contacted to see if they were unionized by a COSATU affiliate; where this was not the case, they were discarded and substituted by another randomly selected organization, and the same check performed.

Employers were then consulted to organize access to the workplace. The final level of sampling was done at

individual workplace level, on a systematic basis, with the number of workers selected being proportional to workplace size. As we did not have access to accurate union membership lists, systematic selection of respondents enabled us to compile the sample during the interview process (Bailey 1982: 93-94). It is recognized that, as the survey depended on the goodwill of management and union leaders, it is possible that workers who were consistently hostile to both could have been excluded from the survey.

The multi-layered nature of the survey methodology may be difficult to justify on strictly technical grounds: however, it represented the most feasible option under the circumstances (Wood and Psoulis 2001); it is indeed striking how closely the results of the 1994, 1998, and 2004 surveys correspond (Buhlungu 2006** &8&).

Separate logit models were estimated for participator democracy, satisfaction with the tripartite alliance and support for the ANC in South Africa's third democratic elections, held in 2004. In each case, we have tried to establish whether attitudes and perceptions were influenced by union, sector, or the gender, age, occupational category, type of employment contract, level of education and mother tongue. For all 3 models most of these factors have no significant impact. The only areas which influence participatory democracy, satisfaction with the alliance and voting for the ANC are the union to which the respondent is a member of, gender and mother tongue.

It was not possible for the 1994, 1998 and 2004 surveys to constitute a panel study owing to the large numbers of redundancies, and, indeed, the high exit rate of firms in a number of industries, such as textiles, where the dropping of protective tariffs proved severely detrimental; the problem of 'panel mortality' would have proven insurmountable (Bailey 1982: 110). Instead, the consecutive surveys constitute trend studies (Babbie 1995: 96; Bailey 1982: 110). It is recognized that trend studies do have limitations, in that it is not possible to compensate for the consequences of different sets of workplace dynamics in different workplaces selected over time. However, a chi-squared analysis of the effects of changes over time revealed in most areas, changes in worker attitudes and were slight (only a few percentage points), and can probably be ascribed to sampling errors (see Buhlungu 2006: **); at the same time, the high degree of

similarity in responses in most areas over time would seem to vindicate the sampling process. More significant changes that did occur in a small number of areas, most notably the following:

- In 1994, 76% of respondents felt that shopstewards should consult very time they acted on behalf of workers; by 2004, this was down to 63%. This could reflect a greater 'trust' in the structures of representative democracy (c.f. Burnell 2003a: 255).
- Attendance at union meetings: by 2004, workers were less likely to attend union meetings weekly, but fewer workers never attended meetings than was the case in 1997. However, overall attendance levels remained generally high.

Measuring Participatory Democracy in Unions

As Morris and Fosh (2000: 96) notes, there are four alternative perspectives on participatory democracy in unions. Firstly, there are *Liberal Pluralist* approaches. These suggest that the extent of participatory democracy reflects whether or not a union has a democratic constitution (all COSATU unions have to, as a condition of affiliation), voting mechanisms (Stepan-Norris 1997: 476-477), the degree of membership participation in elections (Morris and Fosh 2000: 96), and/or meetings in general (Seidman 1953: 222). Parks et al (1995: 536) argue that a temporal dimension is necessary (e.g. when last did a member participate in an election or attend a meeting).

In a classic account, Lipset (1952: 61) argues that members are likely to be able to impact on union policy there are clear alternative positions and camps within a particular union that members may choose to opt for: institutionalized opposition 'permits a degree of direct membership influence on organization policy through their ability to overturn a union government' (Lipset 1952: 61; a similar point is made by Taft 1944: 248). In turn, this may be reflect by whether, how often, and how closely elections are contested (Stepan-Norris 1997: 477- 480; Seidman 1953: 223).

A second viewpoint, the *Consumer Trade Union* one considers members as consumers of union services (Morris and Fosh 2000:97). Members need not be involved in decisions for it to be democratic, as long as leaders know what members want. Where membership is voluntary, it may be assessed as

to how successful it is in getting or retaining them (Morris and Fosh 2000: 97). As can be seen from figure 1, most COSATU unions have been highly effective in recruiting and retaining members through most of the 1990s and 2000s. However, most accounts would suggest that active participation is a behavioral manifestation of union commitment, rather than membership retention per se (Parks et al. 1995: 535).

Thirdly, *Grassroots Activism* approaches look at how active members are in decision making, in seeking to actively control their officials and delegates, and in participating in union affairs (Morris and Fosh 2000: 97; Fairbrother 1983: 24); in other words, the extent to which rank and file actively seek to directly determine policy (Seidman 1957: 35).

Finally, as Morris and Fosh (2000: 98) note, conservative *individual accountability* views hold that the rank and file are inevitably more moderate than leaders (Morris and Fosh 2000: 98); a lack of interest in union affair may mask climate of intimidation (Taft 1944: 251). Hence, the degree of democracy is dependent on mechanisms such as secret ballots (Morris and Fosh 2000: 98).

These categories are not exclusive: there is much overlap between them, and through taking account of these different perspectives, it is possible to develop a composite measure of participatory union democracy (Morris and Fosh 2000: 112-113). Key issues emerging from the above include levels of attendance at union meetings, the regularity of elections, the degree of membership participation in elections, the use of secret ballots, and grassroots demands for accountability and recall.

A Mokken scale was estimated using each individual's responses to these 9 key questions as follows:

- Item 1 Is there a shop steward in the workplace?
- Item 2 Are shop stewards elected by the workers?
- Item 3 Are they elected at least annually?
- Item 4 Have you actually voted in an election within last 2 years?
- Item 5 Is the election by secret ballot?
- Item 6 Do you expect that shop stewards must consult with workers on all, or at least important, issues?

Item 7 Do you expect that shop stewards must report back to workers?

Item 8 Do you believe that you have the right to remove shop stewards if they do not do what the workers want?

Item 9 Do you attend union meetings at least on a monthly basis?

This scale is constructed using Mokken's non-parametric model for one dimensional cumulative scaling (Sijtsma and Molenaar 2002). This generates a scale ranging from 100 for those respondents recording 'yes' for all nine items, zero for those recording all 'no' answers and a position somewhere in between for the vast majority of respondents with a mix of answers. Their relative position in the scale is then determined by their number of positive responses and the relative scarcity of positive responses to each of those survey questions, (Gooderham et al 2006). Therefore each respondent is placed in the scale on the basis of whether they have shop stewards in their workplace, how the shop steward gained their position and how long for, how the respondent expects the shop steward to discharge his/her responsibilities, as well as whether the individual respondent regularly attends union meetings. There are other aspects of participatory democracy, for example having access to union materials and literature, and informal open ended participation in union related issues (Parks et al. 1995: 536), as well as being able to act on that information, but unfortunately there were no questions relating to this in the surveyⁱⁱⁱ.

Once the scale was calculated, it was then used as the dependent variable and a regression model estimated using ordinary least squares on the same explanatory variables as in the logit models.

Findings

The first model (Table 1) estimates the likelihood of participatory democracy being present in the workplace as a function of union, mother tongue and gender. Participatory democracy is measured by elected shop stewards being present in the workplace and being elected/re-elected by the members at least bi-annually (1 = yes, 0 = no). By this measure participatory democracy is present in 79% of the establishments and against the reference group of a male IsiXhosa speaker in NUMSA (National Union of Metalworker of South Africa, COSATU's largest manufacturing affiliate),

members of CWU (Communication Workers Unions), NUM (National Union of Mineworkers), SACTWU (South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union), SAMWU (South African Municipal Workers Union) and SATAWU (South African Transport and Allied Workers Union) were particularly likely to experience participatory democracy. This represents a good cross section of COSATU's affiliates, including well established unions and newer entrants, and those organizing in the manufacturing, mining, service and public sectors. levels of participatory democracy in these, older COSATU affiliates. In other words, participation in shopfloor democracy seems neither shaped by the age of the union nor its chosen terrain.

Those who speak English as a first language, and women are less likely to have a shop steward regularly elected by the members in the workplace. The former grouping would encompass some of COSATU's members from ethnic minorities - including whites, concentrated in SASBO (South African Society of Bank Officials) and within sections of SATAWU (including crew and ground staff of national airlines) - who are relatively late entrants into the democratic labour movement, and hence would have less experience with shopfloor democracy. Somewhat lower levels of female participation represents some grounds for concern, and would reflect the persistence of patriachal values - and sexism generally - within large sections of the labour movement (c.f. Baskin 1991: 354-357; Wood and Psoulis 2001**&8). Nonetheless, the overall participation of women remains high; most women members regularly participate in union affairs and in shopfloor elections.

Table 1: Logit Model of Participatory Democracy

Variable	Coefficient	t-ratio	Mean
Constant	1.173**	2.05	
Union			
CEPPWAWU	0.621	1.23	0.06
CWU	1.417**	2.08	0.05
FAWU	0.702	1.42	0.07
HOSPESA ^{IV}	1.202	1.04	0.01
NATU ^V	-0.954	-1.01	0.01
NEHAWU	0.369	0.80	0.07
NUM	1.117**	2.02	0.08
POPCRU	0.544	1.41	0.13

SACCAWU	0.385	0.85	0.07
SACTWU	1.446***	3.10	0.13
SADTU	0.442	0.96	0.07
SAMWU	1.633***	2.78	0.08
SATAWU	2.049*	1.92	0.04
Age			
Age	-0.0004	-0.03	39.31
Mother Tongue			
IsiZulu	-0.465	-1.41	0.22
SeSotho	-0.098	-0.22	0.09
IsiNdebele	0.288	1.00	0.01
SePedi	-0.661	-1.57	0.08
SeTswana	-0.070	-0.14	0.06
Tsonga	-0.797	-1.30	0.03
IsiSwati	0.279	1.00	0.01
Venda	-1.188	-1.22	0.01
English	-0.749*	-1.76	0.07
Afrikaans	-0.437	-1.11	0.12
Gender			
Female	-0.525**	-2.06	0.34
Dependent Variable	Participatory Democracy		
Mean	0.792		
Observations	573		
Log-likelihood	-269.6		
Restricted log-likelihood	-292.7		

*, ** and *** denotes significance at the 10%, 5% and 1% levels respectively.

Secondly there is fairly broad satisfaction with the alliance (Table 2). 66% of respondents express no dissatisfaction with any aspect of the Alliance. The level of satisfaction is significantly higher with CEPPWAWU (Chemical, Energy, Paper, Printing, Wood and Allied Workers' Union), NEHAWU (National Health and Allied Workers Union), NUM and SACTWU members. Again, these unions represent a good cross section of the federation, although it is interesting that support for the Alliance amongst miners (the NUM has traditionally been among its strongest proponents) is somewhat lower, probably reflecting the periodic bouts of large scale job shedding in that sector. Again, support was significantly lower for SeSotho, SeTswana, English and Afrikaans speakers. The latter two are overwhelming the home language of ethnic minorities, concerned about the loss of particular privileges in the post apartheid era. The lower degrees of support amongst ethnic Sotho and Tswana is somewhat more difficult to explain, but may reflect regional political dynamics and

concerns. Indeed, it should be noted that a regional party loyal to the former dictator of the Bophuthatswana (Tswana) homeland, Lucas Mangope (the United Christian Democratic Party) continues to enjoy some regional support. However, it should be noted that, in the 2002 elections, the ANC gained the overwhelming majority of votes in areas of the country where members of these ethnic groups are concentrated.

Table 2: Logit Model of Satisfaction with Alliance

Variable	Coefficient	t-ratio	Mean
Constant	1.135**	2.20	
Union			
CEPPWAWU	1.062**	2.21	0.06
CWU	-0.755	-1.57	0.05
FAWU	0.365	0.84	0.07
HOSPESA	1.119	0.98	0.01
NATU	-1.206	-1.29	0.01
NEHAWU	1.234***	2.58	0.07
NUM	1.880***	3.41	0.08
POPCRU	0.143	0.40	0.13
SACCAWU	0.562	1.29	0.07
SACTWU	0.645*	1.68	0.13
SADTU	0.288	0.66	0.07
SAMWU	0.305	0.74	0.08
SATAWU	0.455	0.84	0.04
Age			
Age	-0.013	-1.21	39.31
Mother Tongue			
IsiZulu	-0.120	-0.41	0.22
SeSotho	-0.695*	-1.86	0.09
IsiNdebele	0.071	0.08	0.01
SePedi	0.206	0.50	0.08
SeTswana	-1.228***	-2.96	0.06
Tsonga	-0.318	-0.54	0.03
IsiSwati	-0.304	-0.22	0.01
Venda	-1.044	-1.08	0.01
English	-1.755***	-4.47	0.07
Afrikaans	-0.760**	-2.36	0.12
Gender			
Female	0.056	0.25	0.34
Dependent Variable	Satisfaction with alliance		
Mean	0.659		
Observations	573		
Log-likelihood	-334.1		

Restricted log-likelihood	-367.4		
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*, ** and *** denotes significance at the 10%, 5% and 1% levels respectively.

Finally there is very solid support for the ANC (Table 3), 76% overall. This only deviates significantly with NEHAWU, SACTWU and SAMWU members having higher levels of support. FAWU (Food and Allied Workers Union) members, women, English speakers and Afrikaans speakers displayed significantly lower levels of support. Again, the lower support amongst the latter two would reflect persistent concerns amongst ethnic minorities regarding the implications the transition. Why are COSATU members seemingly so happy with the Alliance? In part, this would reflect the ANC's track record in delivering basic social services, including basic health care, social housing, electricity and telephones; these were areas all pointed to as evidence of progress by survey respondents, even though they were unhappy about its poor job creation record (see Buhlungu 2006 **&8&).

It could also reflect the nature of South Africa's opposition. The official opposition Democratic Alliance is white dominated, and has battled to make inroads amongst South Africa's African majority, whilst smaller political parties are dominated by former Bantustan potentates and religious fundamentalists (the sole exception being the tiny Pan Africanist Congress and its equally strife prone breakaway, the Independent Democrats): quite simply, it is easy for the ANC to shine in comparison to the competition it faces. Whilst the ANC's progress in delivering basic social services cannot be dismissed, it cannot be ruled out that at least a portion of loyalty to the Alliance represents 'negative commitment', with the ever-present possibility of growing cynicism and demobilization in the face of 'negative experiences with the institutions of direct democracy' (Southall 2003: 151).

Indeed, 88% of survey respondents held that, in addition to the ANC Alliance, COSATU unions should forge relations with grassroots community and civil society organizations: evidently support for the ANC was tempered by a desire to develop other alliances, probably reflecting concerns that the ANC needs to be held to account and, whatever its successes, 'it must do better' (Buhlungu, Southall and Webster 2006: 208).

Table 3: Logit Model of Intention to Vote for ANC

Variable	Coefficient	t-ratio	Mean
Constant	1.209**	2.08	
Union			
CEPPWAWU	0.041	0.08	0.06
CWU	-0.105	-0.19	0.05
FAWU	-1.110***	-2.41	0.07
HOSPESA	-1.129	-1.24	0.01
NATU	-0.893	-0.97	0.01
NEHAWU	1.650***	2.61	0.07
NUM	0.313	1.00	0.08
POPCRU	0.126	0.31	0.13
SACCAWU	0.409	0.83	0.07
SACTWU	0.725*	1.68	0.13
SADTU	0.216	0.43	0.07
SAMWU	1.070*	1.89	0.08
SATAWU	0.606	0.95	0.04
Age			
Age	0.006	0.50	39.31
Mother Tongue			
IsiZulu	0.015	0.04	0.22
SeSotho	-0.055	-0.12	0.09
IsiNdebele	-0.047	-0.04	0.01
SePedi	0.047	0.10	0.08
SeTswana	0.883	1.31	0.06
Tsonga	0.262	0.32	0.03
IsiSwati	-1.673	-1.11	0.01
Venda	-1.937**	-2.02	0.01
English	-2.050***	-4.92	0.07
Afrikaans	-1.279***	-3.63	0.12
Gender			
Female	-0.698***	-2.63	0.34
Dependent Variable	Vote for ANC		
Mean	0.756		
Observations	573		
Log-likelihood	-266.3		
Restricted log-likelihood	-318.6		

*, ** and *** denotes significance at the 10%, 5% and 1% levels respectively.

The results from estimating a Mokken scale of empowerment are recorded below in Table 4. The first test of the validity of the scale is Loewinger's H-coefficient of homogeneity, (H_{wgt}), which is recorded for each individual item as well as for the overall scale. The minimum acceptance criterion is an H-value of at least 0.3 (Sijtsma and Molenaar, 2002). In the initial estimation of the scale item 5, election by secret ballot, falls below this criterion, hence this item is

omitted and the scale re-estimated. Once this is done all of the remaining items satisfy this and the H-value for the overall scale of 0.42 indicates that the scale is robust in terms of scalability. It is also important to test for the reliability of the indicators; as the Cronbach's alpha of 0.82 is comfortably above the standard minimum of 0.7, there is no reason to doubt the reliability of the scale (Sijtsma and Molenaar, 2002).

Table 4: Participatory Democracy Scale

		Mean	H _{wgt}	Corr.
Scale	Overall calculative scale, 8 items (Cronbach's alpha = 0.82)		0.42	0.3
Item 3	Elections at least annually	0.26	0.45	0.23
Item 4	Voted in elections within last 2 years	0.58	0.45	0.40
Item 9	Regularly attend union meetings	0.70	0.31	0.29
Item 7	Shop Stewards must report back	0.79	0.31	0.30
Item 2	Elected Shop Stewards	0.88	0.48	0.47
Item 8	Right to remove Shop Stewards	0.92	0.36	0.32
Item 6	Shop Stewards must consult	0.94	0.61	0.52
Item 1	Shop Stewards in the workplace	0.95	0.59	0.49

The OLS model reported in Table 5 is a more refined analysis of participatory democracy using the Mokken scale as the dependent variable, the higher the value of the scale the more participatory is the respondents working environment. Participatory democracy is estimated as a function of union, province, gender, age, mother tongue, tenure and highest level of education, with a male, Xhosa speaking NUMSA member in Gauteng who is employed on a full-time basis with a permanent contract and achieved STD 9-10 as their highest level of education being the reference category.

Table 5: OLS Model of Participatory Democracy

Variable	Coefficient	t-ratio	Mean
Constant	61.716***	8.84	
Union			
CEPPWAWU	5.147*	-1.83	0.058

CWU	9.105	1.59	0.047
FAWU	3.409	0.68	0.073
HOSPESA	5.907	0.54	0.010
NATU	-8.543	-0.76	0.010
NEHAWU	-9.638*	-1.95	0.068
NUM	-4.080	-0.43	0.080
POPCRU	7.814*	1.91	0.129
SACCAWU	-6.301	-1.22	0.070
SACTWU	-6.492	-1.50	0.134
SADTU	-7.157	-1.28	0.073
SAMWU	-3.024	-0.64	0.075
SATAWU	9.379	1.51	0.037
Province			
North West Province	2.408	0.24	0.072
KwaZulu-Natal	-7.043*	-1.65	0.131
Eastern Cape	-2.771	-0.61	0.176
Western Cape	-3.871	-0.87	0.234
Gender			
Female	-2.121	-0.86	0.344
Age			
Age	-0.020	-0.15	39.305
Mother Tongue			
IsiZulu	-0.296	-0.07	0.223
SeSotho	-1.489	-0.31	0.087
IsiNdebele	10.375	0.97	0.010
SePedi	-5.438	-1.03	0.075
SeTswana	-3.226	-0.59	0.059
Tsonga	5.314	0.72	0.026
IsiSwati	0.871	0.06	0.005
Venda	2.566	0.22	0.009
English	1.168	0.25	0.072
Afrikaans	9.070**	2.23	0.122
Tenure			
Fixed Term, Part-time	-0.165	-0.02	0.009
Fixed Term, Full-time	-3.101	-0.55	0.035
Permanent, Part-time	16.479**	2.11	0.019
Education			
No Formal Education	-4.429	-0.30	0.005
Std 2 or lower	-5.360	-0.68	0.019
Std 3-5	-5.026	-1.08	0.065
Std 6-8	-0.102	-0.04	0.283
Technical Diploma	5.884*	1.66	0.129
University degree	12.359***	2.41	0.070
Other Qualification	0.096	0.02	0.059
Dependent Variable			
Participatory Scale			
Mean	58.514		
Standard Deviation	24.534		
Observations	573		
R-squared	0.112		

*, ** and *** denotes significance at the 10%, 5% and 1% levels respectively.

The results suggest that to a large extent the level of participatory democracy for COSATU members is unaffected by the explanatory variables, with only 11% of the variation in the scale being explained by these variables. Generally, levels of participation in union affairs remain high, with 74% of respondents attending union meetings at least monthly. Why is participation in union affairs so high? The most likely explanation would be the 'virtuous circle' one: people are more likely to participate if they feel their input has impact, and that structures for the election of representatives, and avenues for their recall are functional, and less so if this is not the case (Burnell 2003b: 13-18). This does not mean that internal democracy can be taken for granted; indeed, research conducted at community level in South Africa has highlighted a propensity for individuals to retain a belief in participative democracy, whilst becoming increasingly disillusioned with their elected representatives and their structures, opening the way for 'growing cynicism and political demobilization' (Southall 2003: 151).

In terms of the different categories of variable, firstly, being in a different union is relatively unimportant with only CEPPWAWU (Chemical, Energy, Paper, Printing, Wood and Allied Workers' Union), NEHAWU and POPCRU (Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union) reaching any level of significance when compared to the NUMSA base group; all these unions are COSATU affiliates that have undergone considerable reorganization (or a major merger, as in the case of CEPPWAWU) in recent years, in contrast to 'mature' unions, such as NUMSA and NUM.

Province is also largely unimportant with only members in KZN experiencing levels of participatory democracy below those of other provinces; this echoes the findings of earlier surveys, and could reflect the difficulties the unions have encountered in the face of sustained hostility by the conservative Inkhatha Freedom Party (although those within the union movement in that province remained overwhelmingly supportive of the Alliance). Thirdly, age and gender are generally insignificant, although Afrikaans speakers (mostly ethnic coloureds) who are COSATU members generally enjoy higher levels of participatory democracy than all of the others: COSATU's coloured members are

concentrated in the textile and food industries, industries that have been heavily unionized for many years.

Fourthly, tenure has very little impact, with only the 1.9% of the sample who are part-timers on permanent contracts being significantly higher up the scale. Finally education becomes important for those at the highest levels, with those holding technical diplomas or university degrees being likely to be employed within a more democratic environment. Whilst members of COSATU affiliates are mostly semi-skilled or skilled workers, they do have significant pockets of support amongst workers with tertiary education in the banking and airline industry: shopfloor democracy in such sectors is relatively new, as it is amongst highly skilled workers in general in South Africa; it is a relatively under-investigated phenomenon, and deserves closer examination in future.

General Issues

The survey revealed both the persistence of high levels of participation in union life, and loyalty to the ANC-Alliance. As Morris and Fosh (2000:111: 112) note, effective participatory democracy is a complex phenomenon, encompassing involvement in union affairs and elections, regularity of elections and electoral procedures, and an active desire by members to be involved in decision making and policy setting, and through holding their representatives to account. It is likely that at least part of the success of the COSATU unions can be ascribed to their ability to combine these features in a manner that would be conducive to encouraging future participation and involvement in union affairs (c.f. Hammer and Wazeter 1993: 302; Burnell 2003b: 13-18; Kelly and Heery 1994). Democratic constitutions and secret ballots can make participation more meaningful; high levels of attendance at union meetings and regular elections make for frequent opportunities to exercise these rights. Exercising these rights is, in turn, more meaningful in an environment where there are general expectations of grassroots input, accountability and recall (c.f. Fairbrother 1983: 24).

The survey also highlighted the limitations of benchmarking approaches to union revitalization. As Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu (2007: 259) note, whilst high levels of democracy and solidarity persist in key unions such as the NUM, the transition has brought with it tensions that threaten this

solidarity. Whilst the South African unions' vital internal democracy, capacity for effective action, and close links with community groupings come close to the organizing unionism ideal (Wood 2002), the relative strength of the South African labour movement also reflects a very specific political tradition.

On the one hand, the unions have been unable to check the government's adoption of a range of neo-liberal macro-economic policies. On the other hand, they have succeeded in placing a brake on the government's privatization plans (c.f. Southall 2007), and have ensured the maintenance - and gradual expansion - of the existing body of industrial relations legislation. Legislation governing the employment contract cannot simply be taken as a given, or something that unions cannot change, even in a common law setting that gives high protection to owner and investor rights (c.f. La Porta et al 1998: 1113-4). Unlike most LMEs, South African labour legislation is relatively progressive, largely as a result of union activities and underscores the extent to which grassroots innovations may radically recast wider systemic realities (c.f. Boyer 2006: 36). The fact that the foundations of the system were laid by the apartheid regime in an attempt to incorporate the unions, and the subsequent ability of the unions to capitalize and build on them, underscores the linkages between law and social action.

As Frenkel and Kuravilla (2002: 389) note, seemingly uniform, homogenizing global forces have varying effects on the fortunes of unions, reflecting both political contexts and the underlying values shared by union members. As noted earlier, in most respects, South Africa is an LME: the ability for unions to prosper in such circumstances reflects both the ability of actors to challenge and remake social realities (c.f. Boyer 2006: 36).

This is not to deny the effects of changes in the global economic system, changes that have resulted in the gradual phasing out of protective tariffs in both South Africa and through much of the developing world. This has led to South Africa both experiencing wholesale job losses, and successful positioning itself as a major exporter of a range of manufactured goods. However, as suggested by combined *macro-micro* accounts of changes in the fortunes of unions, industrial relations practices in South Africa are shaped by both local and global forces, and real strategic

choices (c.f. Kelly and Frege 2004: 182-186; Gundarson and Verma 2003). In practical terms, this means that the specific strategic choices made by organized labour in South Africa are unlikely to be similarly successful elsewhere in the world, in the absence of relatively supportive political alliances and a tradition of mass political activism (c.f. Kelly and Frege 2004:183; Boyer 2006: 36).

Again, this is not to underestimate the difficult choices to be made, and the contradictory pressures within the South African labour movement. As predicted by Offe and Wiesenenthal (1980: 67-89), union members face inevitable conflicts of interest. At workplace level, they have to make strategic accommodations with employers, taking advantage of new forms participation and involvement to promote greater equity and workplace democracy, and help ensure the preservation of jobs (c.f. *ibid.*: 90). Inevitably, such accommodations have provided new opportunities for upward mobility amongst shop stewards, which will serve to weaken union organization capacity, and challenge internal solidarities (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu 2007: 252). Again, participation in co-determinist bodies necessarily weakens the efficacy of collective bargaining and action (Hyman 1999). At the political level, the ANC alliance has helped ensure the preservation and expansion of labour-friendly legislation and has helped derail ambitious privatization plans. Yet, this has also led to the unions reluctantly acquiescing in the gradual adoption of neo-liberal macro-economic policies; attempts to alternative forge grass-roots alliances with community groupings and NGOs to check this have had mixed results (Buhlungu 2004). The continued loyalty of workers to core COSATU unions such as the NUM, and persistent willingness to participate in their organizational life, despite these challenges, reflects their continued role in challenging inequality and discrimination in the workplace, and fresh memories of their central role in bringing about the end of apartheid (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu 2007: 253).

Conclusions

A caveat is first in order. COSATU faces a range of contradictory pressures, both towards accommodation with government and business, and independent militancy; often the latter has been sacrificed in the interests of the former. Again, whilst the unions have gradually increased

their penetration in many areas, these gains have been offset by wholesale job shedding in the interests of international competitiveness. Nonetheless, it retains a high degree of political influence. The ANC led alliance continues to enjoy mass support, whilst workplace leadership remains accountable to the rank and file. High levels of internal democracy and participation in union affairs persist, reflecting the continued role of the unions in challenging workplace racial and associated injustices, despite the weakening of union capacity through constant losses of leaders to government and management, and complex strategic accommodations that may sacrifice short term worker interests (c.f. Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu 2007: 246-254).

The South African experience holds important lessons for organized labour worldwide. Unions should not be seen as passive victims of external forces: even in a LME-type economy, unions may be capable of effectively organizing and mobilizing, and impacting on the wider political economy. This would highlight the limits of linear path dependent approaches to understanding institutions, and the need for an actor-centred view of political economy that takes account of the potentially vital role of collectives other than firms (Kelly and Frege 2004: 183).

Successful unions be simply viewed as those that have made the 'right' strategic choices. Like poverty, organizational failure is not simply the result of incorrect decisions. The same factors do not shape institutions and organizations (Boyer 2006: 15); hence, innovation in one area will not necessarily have the same effects in another. Quite simply, benchmarking best practices - which, as, Hurd (19**) notes, is implicit in much of the literature on organizing unionism - is simply not tenable as a strategy for union revitalization.

The South African unions enjoy their success partially through a specific history of rich and persistent shopfloor democracy, the repeated ability to impact on - or at least restrain - key government policies and the values and solidarities engendered by the struggle against apartheid; hence, the first 'pessimistic' hypothesis is disproved. Although the historical experience of South African unions has some unique aspects, unions in many other parts of the world - from South Korea to Brazil - have similar experiences of resisting authoritarian rule, followed on by

difficult political choices during and after democratization. Unlike their counterparts in many transitional societies, COSATU has yet to part company with the principal national liberation movement, the ANC (Buhlungu, Southall and Webster 2006 **&8&). Whilst such historical experiences seem conducive to mass and effective unionization, they do not absolve unions from difficult strategic choices or free them from contradictory pressures. Pessimistic accounts of the decay of internal union democracy and the alleged unpopularity of the ANC in particular and the tripartite Alliance in general seem misplaced; the second hypothesis is disproved. However, a panglossian view of continued and consistent union success is similarly unjustified; unions face the challenges of declining employment in the formal sector, and managing complex accommodations with business and government. Yet, the manner in which unions have coped with these challenges to date reflects a persistent organizational vibrancy which is encouraging for the future.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Although closed shop agreements are legal when two-thirds of employees have voted in favour of them, in most cases, union membership is voluntary; even in the case of a closed shop agreement, individual employees are permitted to refuse to join on conscientious grounds (Department of Labour 2008: 1).

ⁱⁱ The drop of union density in manufacturing in the early 1990s reflects wholesale redundancies in areas such as textiles in established heavily unionized firms in core urban areas. These job losses have only been partly offset by the emergence of new smaller non-unionized firms in peripheral areas that represent a formidable organizational challenge.

ⁱⁱⁱ Respondents were also asked whether they had served as shopsteward. 26% had, a roughly similar figure to the 1998 survey. We also asked respondents if they had been involved in local government, community development, or participatory initiatives beyond the workplace as a union delegate – 8% had.

^{iv} HOSPESA is not a COSATU affiliate; the small number of respondents in this instance appeared confused as to the exact name of their union (see endnote v).

^v There is no such union within COSATU (or any other federation for that matter) with such an acronym (a former union of that name, the National Agricultural Technicians Union, was registered in 2002). Whilst respondents in the relevant workplaces belonged to a COSATU affiliated union, they were unsure of its name, telling the interviewer that they belonged to a 'national trade union' (NATU) within COSATU, reflecting rank and file confusions as a result of frequent union mergers and name changes. As Crouch (1982: 66) notes, it is possible for members to disassociate themselves from national union goings on, whilst taking an active interest in grassroots affairs, an issue which deserves further investigation.